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AUTHOR Felder, Nathaniel L.
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ABSTRACT

The grading system at the University of North Carolina at Asheville before fall 1978 provided four designations: H (honors); G (good or well above average); P (pass or satisfactory); and F (failure). This range does not provide a grade for unsatisfactory but passing work. It was suspected that this led teachers to give "average" grades for marginal work. In fall 1978 the traditional grading system (A, B, C, D, F) was instituted; this study was undertaken to assess the impact on overall grading practices of the introduction of the D grade option. Grade distributions for four fall terms (1966, 1977, 1978, and 1979) were analyzed. The percentages of passing (P or C) grades and failing (F) grades were computed and compared before and after the introduction of the D option. The grading trend was further analyzed by computing the change in percentage of excellent (H or A) and above-average (G or B) grades over time. The addition of the D option does appear to have given faculty more flexibility in grading marginal students; 5.5 percent of the grades awarded were D's. It was also confirmed that a pattern of grade inflation has existed since 1966, with the proportion of A grades increasing substantially. Seven possible causes of grade inflation are identified, including student and faculty expectations and administrative practices. A list of references is included. (MSE)

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The Introduction of a New Grading System at a Public Teaching Institution: Impact on Grading Tendencies of the Faculty

Nathaniel L. Felder
Office of Institutional Research
University of North Carolina at Asheville
Asheville, North Carolina 28814

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Abstract

A suspicion of grade inflation at a small public undergraduate liberal arts institution led to an investigation of grading tendencies. Also, the introduction of a new grading system warranted a study of the impact of adding a below average but passing grade to a grading system which did not include this grade in the past. The findings provide academic administrators and department chairmen with valuable data to augment managerial decision-making. Faculty and students have become increasingly concerned about grade inflation and its impact on the quality of education received.

Grade inflation is a topic frequently discussed by academic administrators and researchers in higher education (Davidson, 1975; Suslow, 1977). Some authors contend that improved instructional designs have positively influenced the "grade inflation problem" (Denton and Henson, 1979). The desire on the part of students to gain entry to graduate school and the desire of undergraduate faculty to place a high number of department majors into graduate and professional schools is suspected of being a major contributor to a trend in grade inflation (Aristides, 1976).

In almost any university, a number of methods of grading are used by the faculty. In many instances faculty grade students on what is considered a "grading curve". An example of this grading practice, involves taking the high score and the low score recorded from a written examination and prorating the distribution of grades accordingly. In this case the perfect score does not represent answering the total number of questions on the test correctly. Instead, a perfect score or the score which dictates the A grade could reflect only 60 percent of the total number of questions answered correctly, if this is the highest score on the examination.

Schoenfeldt and Bush (1975) reported findings which indicated that the highest average grades are in the course grouping of education. The lowest grades were found in the physical and biological sciences. Goldman and Hewitt (1975) and Goldman, Schmidt, Hewitt, and Fisher (1974) provide evidence that major fields of study with lowest ability students adopt the lowest grading standards while high grading standards are applied by fields with high ability students (cited in Prather, Smith, and Kodras, (1979)

Geisinger (1979) in studying a pass-fail option in a grading system concluded that "granting permission to withdraw from courses late in an academic term, after students have obtained considerable information concerning

their prospective grader, will probably contribute to a continuation of grade inflation". Allowing students to withdraw from courses late in the academic term is a practice followed at UNC-A during the period covered by this study. It is reasonable to suspect that this practice has impacted the grading practices of the faculty.

Faculty leniency and permissiveness, grading innovations, student characteristics, and major field of study have all been cited as probable factors leading to the development of a trend in grade inflation in higher education (Prather, Smith, and Kodras, 1979; Birnbaum, 1979; Warren, 1971; and Hills and Gladney 1968). Denton and Henson (1979) suggest that college undergraduate faculties are using more effective instructional strategies in the classroom. The improved instructional systems have led to increased success on the part of students in mastering the subject matter, thus leading to higher grades.

Prior to the Fall term 1978, the University of North Carolina at Asheville had made use of an unusual grading system. The basic grading system contained the following designation: H, honors or excellent; G, good or well above average; P, pass or satisfactory; F, failure. There was no provision for the awarding of an unsatisfactory but passing grade or even a below average but passing grade. The absence of this range of grading forced the faculty to either pass a student or assign a failing grade. A situation where an instructor was faced with a student doing marginal work provided a lot of room for the humanitarian or benevolent side of the instructor to exert itself. Also, if an instructor used a grading practice which included less objective criteria such as class participation or attendance, there was more room to pass a student than to assign a failing grade. There is a suspicion that the existence of the H,G,P,F system of grading at UNC-A impacted the grading practices of the faculty by forcing faculty to award average grades to marginal students in in the absence of a below average but passing grade.

Beginning with the Fall term 1978, UNC-Asheville began to make use of the following more traditional grading system: A, excellent; B, good; C, average; D, passing; F, failure. Obviously the introduction of the (D) grade, which is considered below average but passing, allowed the faculty more flexibility with marginal students. This led to the assumption that the percentage of C grades and F grades would decrease with the introduction of the D grade.

Grade inflation is a concern recently expressed by the administration at UNC-A. Prior to the Fall 1978 term overall grade point averages were not computed by the registrars office or listed on the transcripts of students enrolled or graduating from UNC-Asheville. Grade inflation is an issue faced by colleges and universities across the country. If there was a pattern of grade inflation at UNC-A, the administration wanted to be aware of it so that preventive measures could be taken. This study was conducted in an effort to assess the impact of a new grading system at UNC-Asheville. A further purpose of the study was to determine if a pattern of grade inflation had begun at UNC-Asheville.

Method

The grades distributed by the faculty at UNC-Asheville during four selected Fall terms were collected by the Office of Institutional Research. The percent of passing and failing grades was computed and compared before and after the introduction of the below average but passing (D) grade. The difference in the percentage of average grades (either P or C) and the percentage of failing (F) grades before and after the introduction of the below average but passing (D) grade provides a good indication of the impact of the introduction of the D grade to the grading system (see Table 1). The increase or decrease in the percentage of excellent (A or H) grades and above average (B or G) grades

awarded over time provides an indication of a trend in grade inflation. The four terms chosen for the study were Fall Term I 1966, Fall Term I 1977, Fall Term 1978, and Fall Term 1979.

[Place Table 1 about here]

TABLE 1

Percent of total grades awarded for four selected terms at UNC-A.

Fall Term	Total Grades Awarded	Grades				
		H or A	G or B	P or C	D	F
1966 - 67*	1630	11.1	22.5	43	-	12.7
1977 - 78*	2863	21	27	29.5	-	5
1978 - 79	6633	26.2	28.1	19.5	5.5	6.4
1979 - 80	7130	27.5	27.5	18	5.4	8.2
						(N=15844)

*Represent Term I only.
Other grades such as "I" or "Audit" are not a part of this study.

Results

A comparison of the number and percent of total average grades and failure grades awarded before the introduction of the below average but passing grade reveals a definite change in grading practices at UNC-A. Also a definite pattern of grade inflation is indicated by the progressive increase in the number of A grades awarded with a corresponding decrease in the number of B and C grades awarded. Over the eleven year span between Fall 1966 and Fall 1977 there was a 10.1 percentage point increase in the number of A grades awarded. This averages to approximately a 1 percent per year increase. The increase between Fall 1978 and Fall 1979 also is about 1 percent. This is a definite pattern of grade inflation which cannot be explained by the addition of the D grade. However, the impact of the addition of the D grade can be seen when a comparison of the P and C grades are made. After the introduction of the D grade the percentage of C grades declined by 10 percentage points. In one year the percentage of C or average grades declined by as much as the A or equivalent grade had increased in eleven years. Of the grades awarded in 1979-80, 55 percent are either A or B grades.

Conclusions and Remarks

The evidence presented in this study led to the conclusion that the assumption that the impact of adding the D grade to the grading system at UNC-Asheville would allow the faculty greater flexiblity with marginal students is confirmed. The faculty awarded 5.5 percent of total grades the D grade. The evidence further confirmed the suspicion that a pattern of grade inflation exists at UNC-Asheville. The number of A grades awarded is increasing at a steady rate and has done so for the last 13 years.

For the past several years UNC-Asheville has allowed students to withdraw from classes late in the term. Geisinger (1979) has suggested that this is a highly probable factor contributing to a trend in grade inflation.

A recent study indicates that 81 percent of the faculty at UNC-Asheville feel that students expecting to receive high grades in their courses correspondingly award their instructors with high grades (Felder, 1980). This finding provides support for the contention that if an instructor really believes that the awarding of high grades will in turn bring high evaluations this belief can lead to a pattern of grade inflation. Holmes (1971) and Kennedy (1975) both report findings which indicate that the grades students expect to receive are positively correlated with student rating data. These findings were also supported by research on student rating data at UNC-Asheville which covered the period from December 1973 to March 1975 (Felder, 1979).

These possible explanations for the pattern of grade inflation at UNC-Asheville are not exhaustive. However, the data does indicate that the suspicions of the academic administrators that the addition of the below average but passing (D) grade has impacted the grading practices of the faculty and that a pattern of grade inflation exists at UNC-Asheville are statistically confirmed. This data should be quite valuable to the administrators and department chairmen as they review practices having a possible or probable impact on the grading behavior of the faculty.

Seven potential causes of grade inflation at UNC-Asheville have been identified. These seven causes or indicators are listed as follows:

(1) Students expected grade variable.

(2) Faculty belief that students expected grade variable contributes to significant variation in student rating data.

(3) The existence of a student evaluation program,

(4) Use of the pass-fail grading option.

(5) Past practice of allowing late withdrawal during the term.

(6) The existence of the term system.

(7) The prior existence of the H,G,P,F grading system.

These seven potential causes or indicators are supported by past and current research conducted by the Office of Institutional Research, reviews of related research and an examination of current and past practices at UNC-A.

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